Sunken Bells

Legends of Christiansen Type 7070
edited by

D. L. Ashliman
© 2013-2019

Contents

1. Bomere Pool (1) (Shropshire).
2. Bomere Pool (2) (Shropshire).
3. Kentsham Bell (Herefordshire).
4. The Mermaid of Marden (Herefordshire).
5. The Bells of Forrabury Church (Cornwall).
6. The Bosham Bell (Sussex).
7. The Whitby Abbey Bells (Yorkshire).
8. Whitby: Submarine Bells (Yorkshire).
9. The Buried Chime (Yorkshire).
10. A Legend of Semewater (Yorkshire).
11. Simmerwater [Semerwater] (Yorkshire).
12. The Bells of Brinkburn (1) (Northumberland).
13. The Bells of Brinkburn (2) (Northumberland).
14. Rostherne Mere (Cheshire).
15. A Legend of Rostherne Mere (Cheshire).

Return to D. L. Ashliman's **folktexts**, a library of folktales, folklore, fairy tales, and mythology.

Bomere Pool (1)

Shropshire

Many years ago, a village stood in the hollow which is now filled up by the mere. But the inhabitants were a wicked race, who mocked at God and His priest. They turned back to the idolatrous practices of their fathers, and

worshipped Thor and Woden; they scorned to bend the knee, save in mockery, to the White Christ who had died to save their souls. The old priest earnestly warned them that God would punish such wickedness as theirs by some sudden judgment, but they laughed him to scorn.

They fastened fish-bones to the skirt of his cassock, and set the children to pelt him with mud and stones. The holy man was not dismayed at this; nay, he renewed his entreaties and warnings, so that some few turned from their evil ways and worshipped with him in the little chapel which stood on the bank of a rivulet that flowed down from the mere on the hill-side.

The rains fell that December in immense quantities. The mere was swollen beyond its unsual limits, and all the hollows in the hills were filled to overflowing.

One day when the old priest was on the hill-side gathering fuel, he noticed that the barrier of peat, earth, and stones, which prevented the mere from flowing into the valley, was apparently giving way before the mass of water above. He hurried down to the village and besought the men to come up and cut a channel for the discharge of the superfluous waters of the mere. They only greeted his proposal with shouts of derision, and told him to go and mind his prayers, and not spoil their feast with his croaking and his kill-joy presence.

These heathen were then keeping their winter festival with great revelry. It fell on Christmas Eve. The same night the aged priest summoned his few faithful ones to attend at the midnight mass, which ushered in the feast of our Saviour's Nativity. The night was stormy, and the rain fell in torrents, yet this did not prevent the little flock from coming to the chapel.

The old servant of God had already begun the holy sacrifice, when a roar was heard in the upper part of the valley. The server was just ringing the Sanctus bell which hung in the bell-cot, when a flood of water dashed into the church, and rapidly rose till it put out the altar-lights. In a few moments more, the whole building was washed away, and the mere, which had burst its mountain barrier, occupied the hollow in which the village had stood.

Men say that if you sail over the mere on Christmas Eve, just after midnight, you may hear the Sanctus bell tolling.

- Source (books.google.com): Charlotte Sophia Burne, *Shropshire Folk-Lore: A Sheaf of Gleanings*, from the collections of Georgina F. Jackson (London: Trübner and Company, 1883), pp. 64-65.
- Source (Internet Archive): Charlotte Sophia Burne, *Shropshire Folk-Lore: A Sheaf of Gleanings*, from the collections of Georgina F. Jackson (London: Trübner and Company, 1883), pp. 64-65.
- Burne's source: "A clergyman, a native of that neighbourhood, who had been familiar with it [the legend] in his boyhood."
- Return to the table of contents.

Bomere Pool (2)

Shropshire

In the days of the Roman empire, when Uriconium was standing, a very wicked city stood where we now see Bomere Pool. The inhabitants had turned back from Christianity to heathenism, and though God sent one of the Roman soldiers to be a prophet to them, like Jonah to Nineveh, they would not repent. Far from that, they ill-used and persecuted the preacher.

Only the daughter of the governor remained constant to the faith. She listened gladly to the Christian's teaching, and he on his part loved her, and would have had her to be his wife. But no such happy lot was in store for the faithful pair. On the following Easter eve, sudden destruction came upon the city. The distant Caradoc sent forth flames of fire, and at the same time the city was overwhelmed by a tremendous flood, while the sun in the heavens danced for joy, and the cattle in the stalls knelt in thanksgiving that God had not permitted such wickedness to go unpunished.

But the Christian warrior was saved from the flood, and he took a boat and rowed over the waters, seeking for his betrothed, but all in vain. His boat was overturned, and he too was drowned in the depths of the mere.

Yet whenever Easter eve falls on the same day as it did that year, the form of the Roman warrior may be seen again, rowing across Bomere in search of his lost love, while the church bells are heard ringing far in the depths below.

- Source (books.google.com): Charlotte Sophia Burne, *Shropshire Folk-Lore: A Sheaf of Gleanings*, from the collections of Georgina F. Jackson (London: Trübner and Company, 1883), pp. 65-66.
- Source (Internet Archive): Charlotte Sophia Burne, *Shropshire Folk-Lore: A Sheaf of Gleanings*, from the collections of Georgina F. Jackson (London: Trübner and Company, 1883), pp. 65-66.
- Burne's source: "Related to me by a lady in the parish of Condover, 1881."
- Note by Burne:

  > The peasant version of the legend is probably that given by Mr. Wright, who says that the village which once occupied the site of Bomere "was submerged as a punishment for the irreligion of the principal farmer in the place, who persisted in cutting his grain on Sunday. It is said that at intervals glimpses of houses and buildings have been seen in the depths of the waters, and that children have been heard crying below, and especially that the church bells have been heard ringing on Sunday mornings." -- *Coll. Arch.*, vol. 1, part 1.

- Return to the table of contents.

Kentsham Bell

Herefordshire

Great Tom of Kentsham was the greatest bell ever brought to England, but it never reached Kentsham safely, nor hung in any English tower. Where Kentsham is I cannot tell you, but long, long ago the good folk of the place determined to have a larger and finer bell in their steeple than any other parish could boast. At that time there was a famous bell foundry abroad, where all the greatest bells were cast, and thither the Kentsham people sent to order their famous bell, and thither too sent many others who wanted greater bells than could be cast in England.

And so it came to pass at length that Great Tom of Lincoln, and Great Tom of York, and Great Tom of Christchurch, and Great Tom of Kentsham, were all founded at the same time, and all embarked on board the same vessel, and carried safely to the shore of dear old England. Then they set about landing them, and this was anxious work, but little by little it was done, and Tom of Lincoln, Tom of York, Tom of Christchurch, were safely laid on English ground.

And then came the turn of Tom of Kentsham, which was the greatest Tom of all. Little by little they raised him, and prepared to draw him to the shore; but just in the midst of the work the captain grew so anxious and excited

that he swore an oath. That very moment the ropes which held the bell snapped in two, and Great Tom of Kentsham slid over the ship's side into the water, and rolled away to the bottom of the sea.

Then the people went to the cunning man and asked him what they should do. And he said, "Take six yoke of white milch-kine, which have never borne the yoke, and take fresh withy bands which have never been used before, and let no man speak a word either good or bad till the bell is at the top of the hill."

So they took six yoke of white milch-kine, which had never borne the yoke, and harnessed them with fresh withy-bands which had never been used, and bound these to the bell as it lay in the shallow water, and long it was ere they could move it. But still the kine struggled and pulled, and the withy-bands held firm, and at last the bell was on dry ground. Slowly, slowly they drew it up the hill, moaning and groaning with unearthly sounds as it went; slowly, slowly, and no one spoke, and they nearly reached the top of the hill.

Now the captain had been wild with grief when he saw that he had caused his precious freight to be lost in the waters just as they had reached the shore; and, when he beheld it recovered again and so nearly placed in safety, he could not contain his joy, but sang out merrily:

> In spite of all the devils in hell
> We have got to land old Kentsham Bell.

Instantly the withy bands broke in the midst, and the bell bounded back again down the sloping hillside, rolling over and over, faster and faster, with unearthly clanging, till it sank far away in the very depths of the sea. And no man has ever seen it since, but many have heard it tolling beneath the waves, and if you go there you may hear it too.

- Source (books.google.com): Charlotte S. Burne, "Two Folk-Tales from Herefordshire,"*The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. 2, part 1 (January 1884), pp. 20-22.
- Return to the table of contents.

The Mermaid of Marden

Herefordshire

In former times Marden Church stood close to the river, and by some mischance one of the bells was allowed to fall into it. It was immediately seized by a mermaid, who carried it to the bottom and held it there so fast that any number of horses could not move it.

The people of the parish were told how to recover it, by wise men, according to some; others say the bell itself gave directions from the bottom of the river. A team of twelve white freemartins, i.e., heifers, was to be obtained and attached to the bell with yokes of the sacred yew tree, and bands of "wittern," or, in some versions, the drivers' goads were to be of witty or wittern (mountain ash).

The bell was to be drawn out in perfect silence; it was successfully raised to the edge of the river with the mermaid inside fast asleep.

In his excitement a driver, forgetting that silence was all-important, called out:

> In spite of all the devils in hell,
> Now we'll land Marden's great bell.

This woke the mermaid, who darted back into the river, taking the bell with her, ringing:

If it had not been
For your wittern bands (or witty goads),
And your yew tree pin,
I'd have had your twelve freemartins in.

So Marden folks have never had their bell back from the bottom of the river to this day, and sometimes it may still be heard ringing, echoing the bells of the church. It lies in a deep clear pool.

- Source (HathiTrust): Ella Mary Leather, *The Folk-Lore of Herefordshire: Collected from Oral and Printed Sources* (Hereford: Jakeman and Carver; London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1912), pp. 168-69.
- Leather's source: "Communicated by Mr. Galliers, of King's Pyon, and completed from other oral versions."
- Return to the table of contents.

The Bells of Forrabury Church

Cornwall

In days long ago, the inhabitants of the parish of Forrabury -- which does not cover a square mile, but which now includes the chief part of the town of Boscastle and its harbour -- resolved to have a peal of bells which should rival those of the neighbouring church of Tintagel, which are said to have rung merrily at the marriage, and tolled solemnly at the death, of Arthur.

The bells were cast; the bells were blessed; and the bells were shipped for Forrabury. Few voyages were more favourable; and the ship glided, with a fair wind, along the northern shores of Cornwall, waiting for the tide to carry her safely into the harbour of Bottreaux.

The vesper bells rang out at Tintagel; and the pilot, when he heard the blessed sound, devoutly crossed himself, and bending his knee, thanked God for the safe and quick voyage which they had made.

The captain laughed at the superstition of the pilot, as he called it, and swore that they had only to thank themselves for the speedy voyage, and that, with his arm at the helm, and his judgment to guide them, they should soon have a happy landing. The pilot checked this profane speech; but the wicked captain -- and he swore more impiously than ever that all was due to himself and his men -- laughed to scorn the pilot's prayer.

"May God forgive you!" was the pilot's reply.

Those who are familiar with the northern shores of Cornwall will know that sometimes a huge wave, generated by some mysterious power in the wide Atlantic, will roll on, overpowering everything by its weight and force.

While yet the captain's oaths were heard, and while the inhabitants on the shore were looking out from the cliffs, expecting, within an hour, to see the vessel, charged with their bells, safe in their harbour, one of these vast swellings of the ocean was seen. Onward came the grand billow in all the terror of its might. The ship rose not upon the waters as it came onward. She was overwhelmed, and sank in an instant close to the land.

As the vessel sank, the bells were heard tolling with a muffled sound, as if ringing the death-knell of the ship and sailors, of whom the good pilot alone escaped with life.

When storms are coming, and only then, the bells of Forrabury, with their dull, muffled sound, are heard from, beneath the heaving sea, a warning to the wicked; and the tower has remained to this day silent.

- Source (books.google.com): Robert Hunt *Popular Romances of the West of England; or, The Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, 3rd edition, revised and enlarged (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881), pp. 438-39.
- Source (Internet Archive): Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England; or, The Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, second series (London: John Camden, 1865), pp. 247-48.
- Return to the table of contents.

The Bosham Bell

Sussex

In the days of the Northmen, a party of pirates came up the creek [to Bosham] in search of pillage. They plundered the inhabitants, sacked the church, and carried off the tenor bell of the monastery. Having put their spoil on board, they dropped down the channel with the ebbing tide; but by the intervention of St. Nicholas the bell refused to remain in such wicked hands, and sank through the deck and the hold of the vessel to the bottom of a great hole in Bosham channel, known to this day as the "Bell Hole," to the great consternation of the heathen marauders.

It is still the belief of the good folk of Bosham that though the bell is deep down in the water, it has not lost its power of resonance, and that whenever a sturdy peal is rung out from the church tower, the lost tenor chimes in with her sister bells, and those standing at the brink of the "Bell Hole " can distinctly hear the whole octave peal.

- Source (books.google.com): Mark Antony Lower, *A Compendious History of Sussex: Topographical, Archaeological and Anecdotical*, vol. 1 (Lewes: George P. Bacon; London: John Sussell Smith; Brighton: W. J. Smith, 1870), p. 67.
- Source (Internet Archive): Mark Antony Lower, *A Compendious History of Sussex: Topographical, Archaeological and Anecdotical*, vol. 1 (Lewes: George P. Bacon; London: John Sussell Smith; Brighton: W. J. Smith, 1870), p. 67.
- Return to the table of contents.

The Whitby Abbey Bells

England

The abbey was suppressed in 1539 A.D., and shortly afterwards dismantled. The bells were sold, and were to be conveyed by ship to London. They were duly placed on board, and, amid the lamentation of the people, the sails were unfurled and the anchor weighed. But, lo! the vessel refused to bear away its sacred burden. A short distance it moved out into the bay, and then -- on the beautiful, calm summer evening -- it quietly sank beneath the waves; and there under the waters, at a spot within sight of the abbey ruins, the bells still remain, and are still heard occasionally, by the superstitious, rung by invisible hands.

- Source: Thomas Parkinson *Yorkshire Legends and Traditions* (London: Elliot Stock, 1888), p. 29.

- Return to the table of contents.

Whitby: Submarine Bells

Yorkshire

A favourite story told in connection with the [Whitby] abbey is one concerning its bells. It runs thus:

> The magnificent peal excited the cupidity of some sea-roving freebooter, and landing with a sufficient force, he extracted the bells from the sacred building and conveyed them on board his vessel. This desecration was however, not suffered to go unpunished, for ere the vessel had gone many miles she struck and foundered a short distance from a projecting ridge of rock called the "Black Nab."

As a fitting conclusion to this we are told, that he who dares on Halloween to spend some time on the rock, and call his sweetheart's name, will hear it echoed by the breeze, accompanied with the ringing of marriage bells from the sunken chime. -- Horne,.

Variant:

> The abbey was suppressed in 1539 A.D., and shortly afterwards dismantled. The bells were sold and were to be conveyed by ship to London. They were duly placed on board, and, amid the lamentation of the people, the sails were unfurled and the anchor weighed. But lo! the vessel refused to bear its sacred burden.
>
> A short distance it moved out into the bay, and then -- on the beautiful, calm summer evening -- it quietly sank beneath the waves; and there under the waters, at a spot within sight of the abbey ruins, the bells still remain, and are still heard occasionally by the superstitious, rung by invisible hands. -- Parkinson, 1st S., p. 29.

- Source (books.google.com): Eliza Gutch, *County Folk-Lore*. Vol. 2: Printed Extracts, no. 4. Examples of Printed Folk-Lore Concerning the North Riding of Yorkshire, York, and the Ainsty (London: Published for the Folk-Lore Society by David Nutt, 1901), pp. 39-40.
- Source (Internet Archive): Eliza Gutch, *County Folk-Lore*. Vol. 2: Printed Extracts, no. 4. Examples of Printed Folk-Lore Concerning the North Riding of Yorkshire, York, and the Ainsty (London: Published for the Folk-Lore Society by David Nutt, 1901), pp. 39-40.
- Return to the table of contents.

The Buried Chime

Susan K. Phillips

> Under the cliffs at Whitby, when the great tides landward flow,
> Under the cliffs at Whitby, when the great winds landward blow,
>
> When the long billows heavily roll o'er the harbour bar,
> And the blue waves flash to silver 'mid the seaweeds on the Scar,

When the low thunder of the surf calls down the hollow shore,
And 'mid the caves at Kettleness the baffled breakers roar;

Under the cliffs at Whitby, whoso will stand alone,
Where, in the shadow of the Nab, the eddies swirl and moan,

When, to the pulses of the deep, the flood-tide rising swells,
Will hear, amid its monotone, the clash of hidden bells.

Up from the heart of ocean the mellow music peals,
Where the sunlight makes his golden path, and the sea-mew flits and wheels.

For many a chequered century, untired by flying time,
The bells, no human fingers touch, have rung their hidden chime,

Since the gallant ship that brought them, for the abbey on the height,
Struck and foundered in the offing, with her sacred goal in sight.

And the man who dares on Hallowe'en on the Black Nab to watch,
Till the rose-light on St. Hilda's shrine the midnight moonbeams catch,

And calls his sweetheart by her name, as, o'er the sleeping seas,
The echo of the buried bells comes floating on the breeze,

'Ere another moon on Hallowe'en her eerie rays has shed,
Will hear his wedding peal ring out from the church-tower on the Head.

- Source (books.google.com): Susan K. Phillips, *On the Seaboard and Other Poems*, 2nd edition (London: Macmillan and Company, 1879), pp. 22-24.
- Source (Internet Archive): Susan K. Phillips, *On the Seaboard and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1878), pp. 20-21.
- Return to the table of contents.

A Legend of Semerwater

North Yorkshire

One day a poor and aged man
Passed through the thriving city
And meekly ask'd of those he saw
For food and rest in pity.

But all so cold their hearts had grown,
With cares and fashions splendid,
The homeless passed on alone
Faint, worn, and unbefriended.

* * * * * * *

Outside the town a cottage stood,
The house of shepherd Malcolm,
Who took him in and gave him food,
And rest, and warmth, and welcome.

Next morning, standing at the door,
He looked towards the city,
And raised his hand and murmured o'er
The words of this strange ditty:

Semerwater rise! Semerwater sink!
And bury the town all, save the house
Where they gave me meat and drink.

* * * * * * *

And still, when boating on the lake
When sunset clouds are glowing,
The roofs and spires may yet be seen
Beneath the blue waves showing.

And as the calm of evening falls,
No sound from landward bringing
Soft music heard from hidden bells
Deep 'neath the waters ringing.

The origin of the curious legend concerning Semmerdale no one seems to know, yet it is very probable some calamity in the shape of a landslip or a convulsion of nature has taken place here, causing disaster to people dwelling on its banks.

The legend says:

> Near the beginning of the Christian era there stood a fair city on the site of the present lake, at that time only a mountain rivulet. One cold winter's day there wandered through its streets an angel in the guise of a poor venerable man, scant of clothing, hungry, and with no money in his scrip wherewith to buy food and raiment. In vain he begged for food and shelter, but no one gave relief.
>
> Passing along the east side of the vale, just without the bounds of the city, stood a small hut, the dwelling place of an aged couple, too lowly, the legend says, to be allowed to dwell within the precincts of the city. To this humble dwelling came the beggar, but even before he told of his hunger the good dame placed milk, cheese and bread before him. After satisfying his appetite he bestowed on the kind couple a blessing.
>
> Beneath their roof he found shelter for the night, and next morning, after again thanking the aged people, he spread his hands to the proud oity and pronounced the following malediction: "Semmerwater rise! Semmerwater sink!" etc.
>
> Then the earth made a hissing noise, the stream grew into a large lake, and the city was no more.

Yet unto this day the natives tell us that the roofs of the buried city are ofttimes seen deep down in the limpid waters. They also point to a hut still standing on the south side of the lake as the dwelling place of the aged couple who so generously relieved the stranger.

- Source (books.google.com): Edmund Bogg, *From Edenvale to the Plains of York: A Thousand Miles in the Valleys of the Nidd and Yore* (Leeds: Edmund Bogg; York: John Sampson, [1884]), pp. 213-215.
- Source (Internet Archive): Edmund Bogg, *From Edenvale to the Plains of York: A Thousand Miles in the Valleys of the Nidd and Yore* (Leeds: Edmund Bogg; York: John Sampson, [1884]), pp. 213-215.
- Return to the table of contents.

Simmerwater [Semerwater]

Yorkshire

There is an old legend connected with Simmerwater, of which the following is the substance: Previous to the year of grace 45, there existed a large and populous city, which stood upon the exact spot now occupied by the lake, then but a small mountain rivulet.

To this city, a wayfarer, who is variously said to have been an angel, St. Paul, Joseph of Arimathea, or Our Saviour himself in the form of a poor old man, came, and solicited in vain the alms of every citizen. Being scornfully repulsed by all, the stranger took his course eastward, down the vale, to the hut or cottage of an aged couple, poor and mean, and there he readily obtained the best morsels the house afforded, viz., a little bowl of milk, some cheese, and an oaten cake.

Beneath their roof was his dormitory for the night, and on the morrow he bestowed on them his blessing. Being ready to depart, he turned his face to the west -- to the "Sodom of Wensleydale" -- and uttered his malediction against the ill-fated city:

> Simmer-water rise, Simmer-water sink,
> And swallow all the town save this lisle house,
> Where they gave me meat and drink.

No sooner was the sentence uttered than it was executed; the earth made a hissing noise, the stream overflowed its bounds, and the city was no more. The poor charitable couple soon became the richest people in the vale, and the blessing descended to their children's children for many generations. -- Whellan, vol. ii., p. 403, note.

Unto this day the natives tell us that the roofs of the buried city are ofttimes seen deep down in the limpid waters. They also point to a hut still standing on the south side of the lake as the dwelling place of the aged couple who so generously relieved the stranger.

> And as the calm of evening falls
> No sound from landward bringing,
> Soft music's heard from hidden bells >br> Deep 'neath the waters ringing.
>
> --Bogg (3), p. 215, and p. 214.

- Source (books.google.com): Eliza Gutch, *County Folk-Lore*. Vol. 2: Printed Extracts, no. 4. Examples of Printed Folk-Lore Concerning the North Riding of Yorkshire, York, and the Ainsty (London: Published for the Folk-Lore Society by David Nutt, 1901), pp. 37-38.
- Source (Internet Archive): Eliza Gutch, *County Folk-Lore*. Vol. 2: Printed Extracts, no. 4. Examples of Printed Folk-Lore Concerning the North Riding of Yorkshire, York, and the Ainsty (London: Published for the Folk-Lore Society by David Nutt, 1901), pp. 37-38.

- Return to the table of contents.

The Bells of Brinkburn (1)

Northumberland

The bell tower [of Brinkburn Priory] looks down upon the Bell-Pool, a very deep part of the Coquet, lying concealed beneath the thick foliage of the native trees that jut out from the interstices of the lofty craggy heights impending over either side.

Tradition says that into this pool the bells were thrown in a time of danger in order to place them beyond the reach of the invading Scots. It is still a favourite amusement among the young swimmers of the neighbourhood, to dive for the bells of Brinkburn, and there it is fully and generally believed that when the bells are found other treasures will be recovered with them.

- Source (books.google.com): William Howitt, *Visits to Remarkable Places: Old Halls, Battle Fields, and Scenes Illustrative of Striking Passages in History and Poetry, Chiefly in the Counties of Durham and Northumberland*, second series (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1842), p. 526, footnote.
- Source (Internet Archive): William Howitt, *Visits to Remarkable Places: Old Halls, Battle Fields, and Scenes Illustrative of Striking Passages in History and Poetry, Chiefly in the Counties of Durham and Northumberland*, second series (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1842), p. 526, footnote.
- Return to the table of contents.

The Bells of Brinkburn (2)

Northumberland

Centuries ago one of the priors of Brinkburn presented the bells of that building to the priory of Durham. They had been the pride of the secluded sanctuary on the Coquet, for their tones were possessed of great power combined with sweetness, and many tempting offers had Durham made to secure them, but hitherto to no purpose.

But she prevailed at length, and the bells so coveted were removed from the tower and dispatched on horseback on their way to Durham under the care of some monks. They journeyed till they reached the River Font, which, owing to a quantity of rain having fallen, was much swelled. However, they prepared to ford it; but when the horses reached the middle of the stream the bells by some means fell, or, according to the popular belief, were removed from the backs of the horses by miraculous interposition, and sank to the bottom. Owing either to the dangerous state of the stream or from the bells being unwilling to be removed, the exertions of the monks to recover them proved unavailing; so they returned to Brinkburn and reported the disaster. But the Brinkburn prior, determined not to be baffled, sent forthwith a messenger to Durham to request the presence of his brother prior, and both ecclesiasties then proceeded with a full attendance to liberate the imprisoned bells; and lo! the superior abilities of high church functionaries over humble monks was manifest to everyone; for they had no sooner ridden into the stream than the bells were lifted with ease; and, being conveyed to Durham, were lodged there in safety.

To this day it is a saying in Coquetdale that "Brinkburn bells are heard at Durham;" and Wallis, in his *History of Northumberland*, assures us that the bells of Brinkburn were removed to the cathedral on the banks of the Wear.

Still there are doubters. Walter White, in 1859, says: "The deep pool where the bells were lost is still to bo seen in the river" [Coquet] (13); and Mr. Wilson is positive that some years ago "a fragment of the bell was found buried at the root of a tree on the hill on the opposite side of the river" (14).

Of the bells, William Howitt, in his *Visit to Remarkable Places, etc.*, p. 525, note, says: "The bell tower looks down upon the Bell Pool, a very deep part of the Coquet, lying concealed beneath the thick foliage of the native trees that jut out from the interstices of the lofty, craggy heights, impending over either side. Tradition says that into this pool the bells were thrown in a time of danger in order to place them beyond the reach of the invading Scots. It is still a favourite amusement among the young swimmers of the neighbourhood to dive for the bells of Brinkburn, and then it is generally believed that when the bells are found other treasures will be recovered with them."

- Source: *The Denham Tracts: A Collection of Folklore by Michael Aislabie Denham*, edited by James Hardy, vol. 2 (London: Published for the Folklore Society by David Nutt, 1895), pp. 132-33.

- Return to the table of contents.

Rostherne Mere

Cheshire

Just to the north of Knutsford lies Rostherne with its mere, one of a small chain of meres, which stretch, a puzzle for geologists, from the basin of the Weaver to that of the little river Bollin. This village of Rostherne is altogether charming, with an ancient church and a few scattered houses in a rich secluded valley.

The church has noble monuments to the proud family that has lived for centuries here in dignified seclusion, and the graveyard with its mouldering heaps slopes steeply down towards the little lake -- the last a thing quite unexpected here in Cheshire, which is not a lake county at all, and is very still, and peaceful, but melancholy looking, shaded with high and thickly wooded banks, where an everlasting silence seems to reign.

Something about the lake in its solitary seclusion seems to have struck the popular imagination. The story goes, that when the church bells were first brought to Rostherne, one of the bells could not in any way be got into the church tower, but, breaking away from ropes and levers, rolled down the steep slope towards the mere, and went on rolling and rolling till it splashed right into the lake, where it was lost in the fathomless abyss. Fathomless indeed is the mere, according to popular estimation, and undoubtedly very deep; a depth of over a hundred feet has been actually measured, and that, for a bit of a mere like Rostherne, is a pretty good record.

Now when the bell got to the bottom of the mere, if it has a bottom, it might reasonably have expected to rest there in peace, but that would be to reckon without the mermaids, notoriously addicted to bell-ringing.

> Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell,
> Hark! now I hear them -- ding dong bell.

But how should mermaids get into Rostherne Mere? Well, the story goes that there exists, between Rostherne and the sea, an underground channel, and that every year on Easter morn a mermaid works her way through and rings the bell that lies at the bottom of the mere, so that those who get up early enough may hear it.

The connection of the bell with Easter seems to class the legend with those children's stories, which are suggested by the customs of the old faith. For from Good Friday to Easter Sunday the bells are altogether silent,

and when children, wondering, ask "What has become of the bells?" they are told "They are gone to Rome to be blessed, but are coming back on Easter morn;" and so it turns out when at daybreak upon the hallowed morn, the children hear the joyous peal.

- Source (books.google.com): *All the Year Round: A Weekly Journal*, conducted by Charles Dickens, new series, vol. 32, no. 766 (August 4, 1883), p. 176.
- Source (Internet Archive): *All the Year Round: A Weekly Journal*, conducted by Charles Dickens, new series, vol. 32, no. 766 (August 4, 1883), p. 176.

- Return to the table of contents.

A Legend of Rostherne Mere

Egerton Leigh

Merrily, merrily rang the bells,
The bells o'er Rostherne mere,
The tale of joy their soft echo tells
E'en Bowden heights may hear.

At Rostherne church long, long ago,
Repairs some workmen make,
When, as they laboured cheerily oh,
They felt the tower shake.

As the tower shook, the largest bell
Was riven from its place,
And eke loud clattering down it fell,
And rolling 'gan apace.

Down the steep cliff-like bank it rolled
That frowns above the mere,
Through the fragrant birch and lindens old,
At length the lake drew near.

It stopped at the brink; hard strove the men
To force it up the crag,
Back to the tower to strain again
Oh 'twas a weary drag!

A sulky labourer madly cried,
"Oh, would the Devil had you!"
But scarce he'd spoke when the bell belied
To the wave downwards flew.

But first in its headlong course it crushed
Th' unlucky wight who swore,
Then down the wild crag madly rushed;
They never saw it more.

Sunk in the depths of that mere profound
To which there's bottom none,
And as it sank a dull gurgling sound
Just to the surface won.

Now sadly, oh! sadly moans the peal,
And mourns that fatal hour;
They seem o'er the bell to ring a knell
That fell from Rostherne tower.

- Source (books.google.com): Egerton Leigh, *Ballads and Legends of Cheshire* (London: Longmans and Company, 1867), pp. 278-79.
- Source (Internet Archive): Egerton Leigh, *Ballads and Legends of Cheshire* (London: Longmans and Company, 1867), pp. 278-79.
- Return to the table of contents.

Return to D. L. Ashliman's **folktexts**, a library of folktales, folklore, fairy tales, and mythology.

Revised September 22, 2019.